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THE DOLL

BY AMY LOWELL

You know, my Dear, I have a way, each Summer
When leaves have changed from ecstasies in green
To something like a crowd with raised umbrellas
Pushing for places at a theatre door,
Whenever there's a reasonable wind—
And when there isn't, why I think it's worse,
They droop so underneath the copper sun
Sitting upon them like a metal cover;
I think the trees look positively tired
Holding the mass of them up all the time.
Well, as I say, when every breeze is smothered
By heavy, lagging leaves on dusty trees,
And all I smell is asphalt and hot tar,
And motor horns destroy the moonlight nights,
I pack myself, and some stray sheets of music,
Into a train and hie me to South Norton.
I came from there, and little drowsy town
Although it is, I still go back (or used to)
And find it with a narrow odd contentment
As grey and glistening as it always was,
Some of it painted, some a silver shimmer
Of weathered clapboards melting to decay.
There always is a blaze of Summer flowers
Cramming the dooryards, stocks and portulaca,
And golden glow above the first floor windows,
And China asters mixed with marigolds.
White paint looks very well indeed behind them
And green blinds, always down, you understand,
South Norton people will not risk the daylight
Upon their best room furniture, and really
When you possess an inlaid teak-wood table,
With mother-of-pearl and ebony in squares,
And on it, set precisely in their order,
Stand ivory chess-men, red and white, the queens
A pair of ancient Maharanies copied

To every quaintness of their grand attire
And not a button or embroidery
Skipped by the Hindu carver; when your chairs
Are waxed as never chair is waxed to-day,
And there are corners lit by golden silks,
And mandarin fruit-dishes in high glass cupboards,
Perhaps you may at least be half forgiven
For only opening the room for weddings
Or when some guest from Boston comes to call.
I have called often in such drawing-rooms,
Confused at first by coming from the dazzle
Of a white August sea, and almost groping
To find my hostess in the green-blind dusk,
While all the time my nose was being grateful
For the great puffs of pot-pourri and cloves,
The gusts of myrrh, and sandal-wood, and ginger
Invisibly progressing up and down.
These scented rooms are just a paraphrase
Of something penetrant, but never clear,
Never completely taken nor rejected,
Unrealized flotsam of the tides of trade;
And these frail, ancient ladies are like tea-dust
Left in the bottom of a painted chest,
Poor fluttering souls, surrounded by their "things,"
Oblivious of the sea which brought them here.
My Dear, I prose, you really must not let me,
For after all I have something to say.
I never make these duty calls until
My music lessons are a week away
And each day's mail is stuffed with pupils' letters
Asking for dates and prices, then I go
The rounds and drink a dish of tea with each
Old fragile chrysalis and so come home.
For many years I've always ended up
With the two Misses Perkins. They were a whiff
Of eighteen-forty, and I rather liked
To talk to them and then come back and play
Debussy, and thank God I had read Freud;
The contrast was as genial as curry.
I only wish that I could make you see them,
Their garden path with spice-bushes and lilacs,
The scraper by the door, the polished knocker,
And then the hall with the model of a clipper
Upon a table in a square glass case.

She is a replica of the *Flying Dolphin*
And Captain Perkins made her on a voyage
Of eighteen months to China and Ceylon.
Miss Julia just remembers when he brought
The model home and put it where it stands.
I always laid my gloves upon the table
Just by the clipper's stern, and stood my sunshade
Against the corner, and tiptoed up the stairs.
Miss Perkins was an invalid, for years
She had not left her bed, so I was summoned
Up slippery stairs and over cool, long matting
Into her room, and there in a great four-poster
The little lady would greet me with effusion.
"Clara, Dear, how good of you to come!
Julia and I were wondering if you would.
You'll have a cake and a small glass of sherry.
Hannah will bring them in directly. Now,
How is the music getting on? To think
You play at concerts! Julia and I read
About your triumphs in the newspapers."
And all the time, behind the house, the sea
Was moving—moving—with a long slow sound.
I could not hear it, but I clung to it,
For naturally this room looked on the street.
It was a pretty room with bright glazed chintz,
And Naples bay in staring blue gouache,
Flanked by Vesuvius at night, both pictures framed
In peeling gold. Upon the mantelpiece
Were silhouettes: the Captain and his wife,
Miss Perkins and Miss Julia in pantalettes,
A china bear for matches, and a clock
Suspended between alabaster pillars.
But what I never could keep long from seeing
Was a large wax doll, dressed in the Paris fashion
Of sixty years ago, with a lace tippet
And much flounced skirt over a crinoline,
Upright in a winged arm-chair by the bed.
She sat and gazed with an uncanny ardor
Straight at the andiron, her hands palms upward,
Her feet in heelless slippers wide apart.
She fascinated me. Those blue glass eyes
Had an unearthly meaning, staring straight
Before her in her faded finery.
I had to draw a chair up from the wall,

For never did Miss Perkins or Miss Julia
Suggest that I should sit in the winged chair.
I found my mind all drawn upon a focus,
I thought wax doll and very nearly said so,
And I am very much afraid I missed the point
Of one or two quite artless little sallies.
They never said a word, and I with rigor
Suppressed my curiosity and merely listened
With sometimes half a mind and sometimes none.
I drank the sherry and I eat the cake,
I kissed Miss Perkins when I came to go,
Bending over the bed, my skirt just touching
The doll, I think, and then the call was over.
Of course at first the thing made no impression.
I thought they had been clearing out the attic
And come upon the doll; but when each year
She was still sitting there, I grew to dread
Encountering her, she seemed so full of tales,
Tell-tales of maiden ladies left alone
With still things on the walls and mantelpieces
And nothing moving round them but the sea
Kept out of reach beyond the matted entry.
One year, in early April, coming in
All flushed with having played Moussorgski's "Pictures"
To an enthusiastic audience,
I found a black-edged letter on my table,
Miss Julia writing that "Dear Sister Jane
Had passed away, she wanted me to know."
The words were quaintly quiet and resigned,
The slim and pointed writing very calm,
But still there seemed a wistful hint of dread.
I knew, in fact, Miss Julia was alone.
I wrote—oh, what one always writes, the things
One does not think, and does not want to think.
I sent the letter, and the answer came
As slim, and pointed, and reticent as ever.
And that was all until I reached South Norton.
Of course I went at once to see Miss Julia.
She greeted me beside the clipper-ship,
And there was something grim about that vessel
Placidly sailing on its painted waves
With coffins passing through the door beside it,
From time to time, while nothing ever came.

I wondered what would be its fate; some junk-shop
Probably, when Miss Julia too had gone.
Poor soul, she seemed to flicker with excitement
And sorrow all in one. The great importance
Of doing something which was not commanded
Appeared in vague authoritative gestures,
Which seemed but half controlled and faded off
Into a quiver of movement so pathetic
It made me want to cry. She begged me
To go upstairs. "I cannot bear to be
In any other room but Jane's," she told me.
"I've sat there so much with her, quite ten years
It was she did not leave it." So we mounted
The broad old stairs, and softly trod the matting
Walking gently as in a house of mourning.
I was resentful, it was four full months
Since I had got that lonely little letter.
Was this a mausoleum? Was Miss Julia
To find her only company with ghosts?
The gaudy paper of the narrow hallway,
Flashing its minarets to a sapphire Heaven
Seemed to be mocking us with Eastern splendor,
With Eastern customs and an Eastern languor.
The conch shells roared a siren song of oceans,
Flanking the newel posts, as we passed by them.
Miss Jane's room was a lovely blaze of sunlight,
The empty bed was orderly and sane,
The Bay of Naples gladdened without hurting.
I shook myself free of the swarming stillness
And saw with satisfaction that the chair,
The doll chair, had been moved, it stood beside
The window with its back toward the room.
Why did I walk up to it? I don't know.
Some feeling that the usualness of streets
Comes kindly over a long spent emotion
Perhaps. At any rate, I did so, saying
How bright and gay the portulacas were,
Or something of the sort. And then I started
To sit down in the chair and saw the doll
With palms stretched out and little slippered feet
Pointing before her. There she sat, her eyes
Fixed glassily upon the window-pane.
I may have jumped, at any rate Miss Julia
Flushing a painful pink said steadily:

“It was so dull for her after Jane died,
I moved her here where she could see the street.
It's very comforting to watch the passing,
I think. I always find it so.” That's all.
I don't know how the visit went, nor what
I said, nor where I sat. I only know
I took the train that evening back to town
And stayed up half the night playing Stravinski.
I dreamt wax doll for three weeks afterwards,
And I shall go to London this vacation.